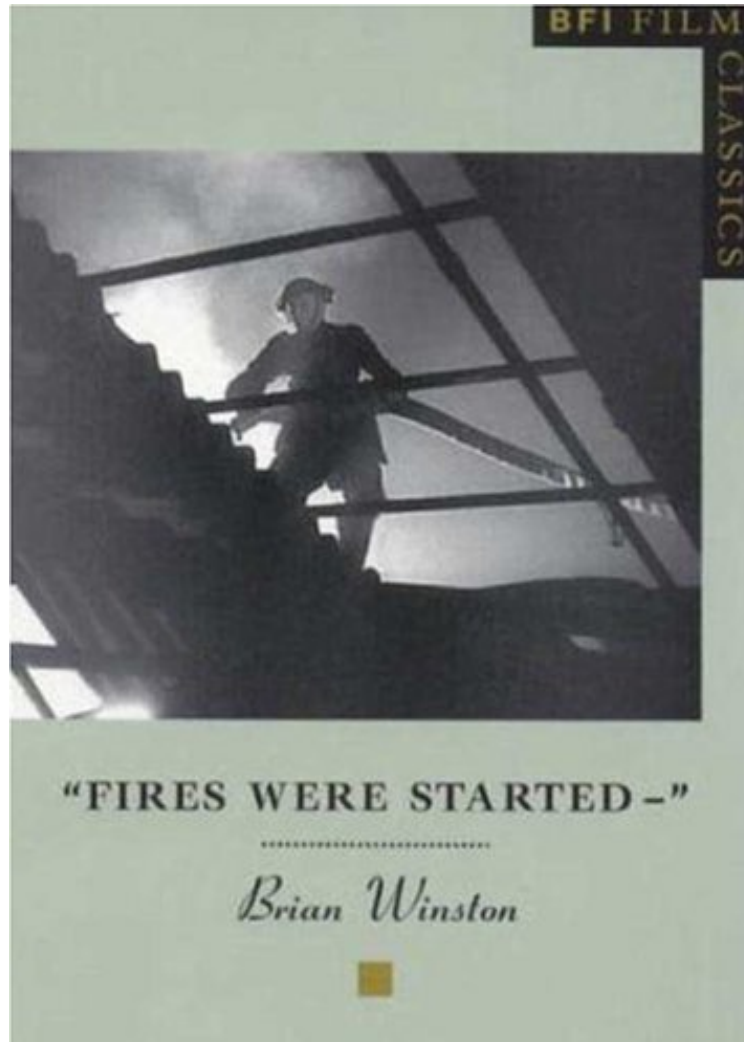


[FREE] Fires Were Started (BFI Film Classics)

## Fires Were Started (BFI Film Classics)

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**NA NA : Fires Were Started (BFI Film Classics)** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Fires Were Started (BFI Film Classics):

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. Sage introduction to one of Britain's greatest filmmakers. By darragh o'donoghue The most important and influential development in 1930s British cinema was the documentary movement, which was given the name by its chief practitioner, John Grierson, head of the General Post Office Film Unit. These documentaries weren't what we understand by the term today - rather than utilising fly-on-the-wall, observational techniques, these films were reconstructions of actual, 'typical' events, involving prior 'scientific' research and witness accounts, and often using scripted dialogue, sets and some kind of narrative structure. Most of these films - dull, instructional, governmental works - are of little cinematic interest today. Only one figure emerges with claims to

genius - Humphrey Jennings, Cambridge don, poet, painter, pioneering sociologist and organiser of the first British Surrealist exhibition. Jennings began work with Grierson's unit in the mid-30s, but was pre-eminent during the war, with a series of films that transcended their documentary or propaganda origins to magically capture that elusive British spirit. For this, he has been called 'The only real poet the British cinema yet produced'. Although the most conventional of his films - a feature length drama narrating one day and night in the activities of the London Fire Brigade and the volunteer Auxiliary Fire Service during the Blitz of 1940-41 - 'Fires Were Started' is considered Jennings' masterpiece, and typical of his style. It mixes conventional 'documentary' elements, such as the training routine of the service or the structural workings of the system, with moments of pure epiphany - the flute-playing of a busker as the firemen go to work; a sing-song in the Recreation room before the exigencies of fire-fighting; the recital of poetry by Raleigh and Shakespeare. In this way, recognisable, flawed, 'ordinary' people take on an unsentimental, uncondescending, unforced stature. Documentary theorist Brian Winston doesn't set out to question Jennings' canonical status, meticulously detailing and analysing the elements of his style instead. He puts the film in its historical context, as well as situating Jennings as both an idiosyncratic individual and as an often unwilling part of Grierson's documentary unit. He emphasises the collaborative input behind Jennings' work, in particular the contribution of editor Stewart McAllister, who achieved many of the films' most startling and evocative effects. The details of the production are highly revealing of British attitudes at the time regarding censorship, as well as the urgent needs of censorship (e.g. the 'authentic', fruity language of the firemen had to be toned down; the important role of women is minimised; the bureaucratic bumbling of the system is ignored; the realities of the black market, conscientious objecting, shirking and other 'unpatriotic' activities are downplayed). Most importantly, Winston distinguishes Jennings' form of propaganda, which depends on appeals to shared notions of British identity, rooted in history, culture and experience, to the brainwashing, mind-thumping of, say, Leni Riefenstahl. He concludes with an impassioned defence of the film's 'documentary value' (and, ironically, this reconstruction has yielded some of the most famous 'real' images of the Blitz we have), in spite of failing to live up to the narrow, 'tendentious' criteria nowadays demanded of the form. In the end, however, as Lindsay Anderson, Jennings' most famous proselytiser, noted, the magic of his world 'can be analysed only to a certain point, then it must simply be experienced'. If this book provokes enthusiastic interest in the unique joys of Jennings' cinema, than it will have been worth writing.

This work suggests that Humphrey Jennings' re-enacted documentary about the London Blitz, "Fires Were Started" is an understated propaganda masterpiece whose documentary value, despite the reconstructions required by film technology in the 1940s, remains undimmed. The author provides a full account of exactly how Jennings recaptured the reality of the Blitz for his cumbersome camera through a process of meticulous research and extraordinary sensitivity.

"Probably the most cogently argued study of Jennings so far." -- Sight and Sound  
From the Back Cover  
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About the Author  
Brian Winston won an Emmy for documentary scriptwriting and is the author of *Claiming the Real* (1995) *Technologies of Seeing* (1996), *Media Technology and Society* (1998) and *Lies, Damn Lies and Documentaries* (2000). He is Head of the School of Communications at the University of Westminster.